

COLUMNISTS

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Why don't we hear the cries from Darfur?

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By MARY ELLEN SCHOONMAKER

WE ARE an informed citizenry. We know what bizarre outfit Michael Jackson wears to his trial each day. We know Martha Stewart walked her dog the morning after she was released from prison.

We know Bill Clinton is having surgery today to remove scar tissue and fluid from the left side of his chest. The press spares no energy in covering these stories.

But what do we know about Darfur, the region of the Sudan where slaughter is taking place on a massive scale? Almost nothing.

Given the choices America's news editors make each day, the question arises: What story trumps genocide? Crimes against humanity are being committed in Darfur, and they could be stopped if enough people - including media decision-makers - cared enough to make it a cause.

But almost no one does. When Sen. Jon Corzine held a press conference last week to introduce a bipartisan bill that outlines a plan of action to stop the genocide, one reporter and two cameramen showed up. Corzine can pack them in when he talks about Social Security, but not when he offers a way to stop the vicious killing of tens of thousands of men, women and children.

Darfur has received so little coverage you might think the slaughter is over. It isn't. There are a few voices calling attention to it: humanitarian groups such as Human Rights Watch, Corzine, Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kansas, and a handful of other members of Congress, and New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof. They cite new accounts of rape, torture, mutilation, the slaughter of children and the total obliteration of whole villages - horrors that have continued to happen in recent weeks.

By some estimates, in two years of ethnic cleansing, 225,000 people have died and almost 2 million have been driven from their land. People continue to die at the rate of up to 10,000 a month.

Kristof took the unusual, almost desperate step of running four graphic photographs with his column on The Times op-ed page last month, in the hope of trying to shock readers into action. The photos were taken from a classified file being compiled by monitors from the African Union, the group of nations that has sent the only armed troops into the region - although there aren't enough troops to do much of anything except document the slaughter.

The photos with Kristof's Feb. 23 column included the body of a toddler lying

next to the bodies of his 5-year-old brother and his mother. Kristof chose not show the teenagers from a girls' school who were burned alive or other graphic examples of depravity. Some of the photos show men in the uniforms of the Sudanese army involved in the crimes.

I wish our national newspapers such as The New York Times or The Washington Post, or CNN or Peter Jennings would vow to run a story on Page One or on the nightly news every day until something is done to stop the genocide. Describe the atrocities, the complicity of the Sudanese leaders, and the inaction of the Bush administration, the United Nations and the world community - and keep at it. Maybe such persistent coverage would shame the White House or Congress into doing something.

We don't have to send troops into Sudan. Corzine's bill would pay for the African Union to add more troops and provide them with equipment and technical assistance. It also calls for an arms embargo, a no-fly zone and a U.S. special envoy for Darfur who would press the U.N. Security Council to set sanctions against the government in Khartoum.

Yet this eminently reasonable, affordable plan has received almost no attention.

Corzine calls his bill "a reflection of our commitment to live up to the most solemn promise of our time and to our nation's values: to never again stand by while genocide is raging."

The reaction to the tsunami disaster showed that people can respond to suffering in distant parts of the world with great compassion. Why not to Darfur? Corzine believes it's because they're not seeing what is happening there. Darfur is "waiting to capture the public's imagination if it's properly framed," he told me this week. If the genocide was presented in stark, visual terms, if the magnitude of the atrocities was brought home to them, Corzine says, Americans would respond.

And their outrage would force the White House to respond.

"Before history is written in books, it is written in courage," President Bush said this week in a major foreign policy speech - which did not mention Darfur even once.

At this point, the history of how the world reacted to this genocide is not being written in courage, but in complete and callous disregard.

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